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Barbara Nelson was Barack Obama's English teacher in high school in Hawaii.

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Teacher from Kenmore recalls Obama was a focused student

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When Barack Hussein Obama places his hand on the Bible today to take the oath of office as 44th president of the United States, Barbara Nelson of Kenmore will undoubtedly think back to the day he was born. It was Aug. 4, 1961, at Kapi'olani Medical Center for Women & Children in Honolulu.

"I may be the only person left who specifically remembers his birth. His parents are gone, his grandmother is gone, the obstetrician who delivered him is gone," said Nelson, referring to Dr. Rodney T. West, who died in February at the age of 98. Here's the story: Nelson was having dinner at the Outrigger Canoe Club on Waikiki Beach with Dr. West, the father of her college friend, Jo-Anne. Making conversation, Nelson turned to Dr. West and said: "So, tell me something interesting that happened this week," she recalls.

His response: "Well, today, Stanley had a baby. Now that's something to write home about."

The new mother was Stanley (later referred to by her middle name of Ann) Dunham, and the baby was Barack Hussein Obama.

"I penned the name on a napkin, and I did write home about it," said Nelson, knowing that her father, Stanley A. Czurlles, director of the Art Education Department at Buffalo State

College, would be interested in the “Stanley” connection.

She also remembers Dr. West mentioning that the baby’s father was the first black student at the University of Hawaii and how taken he was by the baby’s name.

“I remember Dr. West saying ‘Barack Hussein Obama, now that’s a musical name,’” said Nelson, who grew up in Kenmore and went to Hawaii in 1959 to be in Jo-Anne’s wedding party. When Nelson was offered a job as a newspaper reporter and photographer at her friend’s wedding reception, it led to her living in Hawaii for 47 years. She returned to Kenmore in 2006.

Ten years after that memorable birth announcement, Nelson would hear the Obama name again. This time, the father, now a Kenyan government official, was coming to speak at the Punahou School in Honolulu where Nelson was teaching and where his 10-year-old son was a newly enrolled fifth-grader.

“Dr. Obama had this lovely, attentive manner,” she said. “When he answered the children’s questions, he would do it as a story, which is the way they do it in Kenya.

“His son, whom he hadn’t seen in eight years, seemed as fascinated as we all were,” said Nelson, who went on to be a high school principal, a harpist, a watercolor artist and poet.

A few years later, Nelson encountered “Barry” again, when she watched high school basketball games, where her students played.

“The team came alive when he got on the court,” she said. “He was not only quick and graceful, but he could see the pattern and zero in on the opening. Though he wasn’t a starter, he was a graceful, passionate athlete who played back-up forward. He had a definite presence on the court.

“I often sat with his grandmother, who was a no-nonsense woman with these very solid Midwestern ways about her,” said Nelson. “She loved that boy and he adored her.”

As a high school teacher of British, Biblical and Middle Eastern literature, Nelson taught Obama.

“He wasn’t usually the first one to speak, but he was an attentive, active listener,” she said. “While the others might be bouncing off the surface, he came straight from the center. He picked up on the patterns of ideas and then he’d make a statement that moved the class to the focal point.

“He also had a lovely, engaging sense of humor,” Nelson said. “He was firm, but he wasn’t aggressive or in your face.”

During one class the question was posed “of what should we be most afraid,” drawing answers that included “death,” “hell,” “biological warfare,” “fear” and “isolation,” said Nelson.

“I recall Barack sitting in the back of the room,” Nelson said, demonstrating a hands-behind-his-head pose and describing his lanky, outstretched legs.

“When he pulled himself upright I thought ‘Bingo. Here we go,’ ” she said, expecting the discussion to move to a new level.

“And he said, ‘Words. Words are the power to be feared most. Every individual has an unmonitored arsenal and whether they are directed personally or internationally, words can be weapons of destruction.’”

It was such moments that led Nelson to honor Obama at his 1979 graduation with the traditional draping of a lei around his neck.

“I had a yellow plumeria tree and I could get only enough blossoms to make five leis,” she said. “I had taught more than 200 students, but one of those leis went around the shoulders of Barack Obama.”

Years later, the ideas Obama expressed resonated as Nelson wrote “War of the Words,” which includes the lines: “*I fear the powerful pugnacious words, Weapons that miss the flesh and pierce the heart.*” (Songs of Honor, 2006).

In the author’s notes, Nelson describes the classroom discussion with Obama that inspired the poem and she adds this information: “Interestingly, this former student is now a very wise, articulate U. S. senator.”

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